

POZNAN 2014

« Car le vrai rôle d'un festival est d'aider les artistes à oser, à entreprendre des projets... »
Bernard Faivre d'Arcier

Atelier for Young Festival Managers 20 - 27 October 2014

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Speech by Mark Ball

Artistic Director LIFT

Opening Ceremony, 20 October 2014, Poznan, Poland

Thank you to the city of Poznan, the partners and funders and thanks also to the brilliant Malta festival and to the fantastic EFA team.

But also thank you - each and every one of the Atelier participants - because you are the generation that holds the future of festivals in your hands. That's a big responsibility - but also an exciting one.

I'm Mark Ball, the Artistic Director of LIFT, the London International Festival of Theatre and I've worked in festivals for almost 20 years - I set up the Fierce Festival in Birmingham in 1997 and have mainly worked in performance festivals but also film, architecture and new media.

Now I am at LIFT, with a 34 year history of presenting ground breaking international theatre across London. But I'm not going to talk about LIFT much tonight - you'll find out more about that tomorrow.

Tonight I really want to start your thinking off for the week with four of big issues and questions any us running festivals should be concerned with.

POINT One.

Festivals matter.

We need festivals now more than ever.

Liberalism and the forces of fear are sweeping across Europe and much of the rest of the world. Fear of the other and a fear of the future that is making people cling to the perceived certainties of the past.

In my own country the big political earthquake is the rise of UKIP, an anti-immigration and anti-European party and we are seeing that replicated across Europe. We are also seeing the censorship of artists and a debate about the responsibility of art.

Here in Poland, and now in London and New York.

In this context we need festivals because festivals welcome the other. Because festivals embrace risk, champion, new ideas, and new ways of looking at and thinking about the world.

Because they celebrate internationalism and diversity, bring neighbours into dialogue and build temporary communities.

And because they are led by the great explorers of our time – artists.

As the British theatre critic Lyn Gardner says "a great festival shows us a map of the world, a map of our city and a map of ourselves".

They are more important now, than at any point I can think of in my professional lifetime.

POINT Two.

Festivals are changing. The great international festivals of Edinburgh and Avignon were founded out of the ruins and rubble of WW2 and after humanity's darkest hour they celebrated culture as the highest expression of the human spirit - and hundreds of festivals all over Europe and the rest of the world followed in their wake introducing the public to artists like Peter Brook, Robert Le Page and Robert Wilson and monumental shows like Einstein on the Beach.

But today's most successful festivals - and I hope we will explore what this means in the next few days - represent something very new and they are no longer just the repositories of high art and fine thinking.

All over the world today's successful festivals are characterised by a new sense of openness.

They bring together international artists and local people with projects that enable dialogue and truly connect the global and the local.

They realise and understand that imagination cannot be contained in theatres, arts centres and concert halls - and that art and performance can happen anywhere.

They turn our cities into playgrounds of possibility, creating site-based work that uses the whole city and its communities as a canvas.

They bring art closer to the people and allow artists and audiences to go on a journey of discovery about the places in which they live - often revealing something new and hidden about the buildings or the people we pass every day.

And they realise that audiences - in a world where technologically enabled interaction is ubiquitous - no longer only expect to just sit passively in the dark waiting for a cultural experience to be presented to them. They desire and demand new, immersive experiences - where they themselves can be and feel part of the action.

POINT 3

Because the characteristics of a successful festival now include how we engage our audiences - **we must put audiences/the public at the heart of our thinking.**

We have a responsibility to ensure that the work of great artists isn't a minority interest playing to a cultural intelligentsia but reaches broad and diverse audiences.

I am incredibly passionate about this and the arc of arc of my career has been spent moving from this -

And it's not just because I believe that amazing artists deserve big audiences - which of course they do.

It's more than that.

I'd actually argue that it's a moral and social obligation as festivals who take any level of public subsidy - from the tax payer or the lottery ticket buyer - to deliver value back to the public.

We should be bound into a social contract with our audiences and communities. And if we understand that - and embrace it - then we and our festivals have a chance of being successful and sustainable.

Because be in no doubt that the foundations on which culture and festivals have been traditionally supported are crumbling and crumbling quickly - certainly in the UK and across Europe - and in many of parts of the world I travel to as well.

Politicians no longer feel the automatic requirement to support the arts through public investment.

The public tunes out when artists and arts professionals make the case for more money.

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And as education is increasingly driven by market forces, the arts are becoming marginalised in schools and universities as take up diminishes, undermining the next generation of artists and audiences.

We are seeing a shift in the support and underpinning of culture that is seismic and I suspect unstoppable.

So the arts urgently need legitimacy and that now must be derived from our relationship with the public. They are the people who experience the work, who support it with their tax and income and - who should be the most effective champions and advocates for what we do. Successful festivals will now depend on a new and successful relationship with them.

We must engage the public in radically different ways. We must enter into a dialogue with them about what they actually want and how they want it delivered - rather than thinking that we somehow instinctively or curatorially know what they want.

And that requires lots of commitment to dialogue and research and to engaging with more diverse communities that are often hidden or who are under-represented by the arts. And it requires curiosity and generosity.

30% of LIFT's work in recent years has come from North Africa and the Middle East. Why? Yes of course it's because there is an exciting new performance culture developing there - but principally because there is a very large community of people from the Arab world in London who are not represented by arts organisations in the city, but who now form the majority of our audiences for those shows.

If you listen to and respond to the public it also means that the festivals you build speak to and responds to the city and its people - they're distinctive and original and not identikit programmes that can travel from city to city to city - something sadly I see all too often.

And finally POINT 4

To engage audiences in new and powerful ways **we must embrace technological innovation** and think about its potential for content, communication and community building.

In particular we need to harness the power of the network that connects literally billions of us together in a way that was simply unimaginable a decade ago.

The global Internet connected population is more than two billion people, and there are more than three billion mobile phone accounts. We are living, for the first time in history, in a world where being part of a globally interconnected network is a day-to-day reality for most citizens.

And those making decisions about the use of public resources are increasingly understanding the power of that network - and we must too. They understand that the networks people use all the time - Facebook, twitter etc. through their sheer size now act as an aggregator of public interests and opinion.

So now in Australia and the UK a new web based and mobile application - with the very unpioneering name the Public Value Measurement Framework (PVMF) - is currently being beta tested by Arts Western Australia and Arts Council England.

It's an app that allows the public to form networks around events and provide direct, instant feedback and comment and share experiences with other audience members.

Nothing too revolutionary you might think - a kind of Facebook for the arts.

But the Department of Culture of Western Australia and probably the Arts Council will now be using information gathered from the app to collect evidence and data of the full value of government expenditure on the arts based on what is actually valued by the public. And it will use this evidence when it considers its funding decisions of individual organisations. It understands that expertise and opinion is no longer the preserve only of experts but also of the public crowd sourcing opinions about shows and companies.

Love it or hate it, this signals a radical change in arts funding policy and is yet another sign that we need to radically recalibrate our relationship with the public.

We need to embrace the fact that technology will allow audiences to actively participate and create new value for one another and encourage them to interact with us constantly on digital platforms.

Festivals are brilliant. They offer a unique lens with which to look at the world. They build civic pride, create a sense of place and make our towns and cities better places to live.

But to safeguard their future and maximise their potential we must embrace new thinking.

We must invest in, and understand the affordances and opportunities of new technology and social networks and create festivals that are porous and support a culture that values openness, engagement and participation.

We must build a new contract with the public - where we do things with them and not for them.

Enjoy the next week where I look forward to delving deeper into these issues with you.

Thanks.